

The 200-Year Fight for Abortion Access

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We tend to take reproductive rights for granted, but from a historical perspective, they were won almost yesterday. In the 18th and early-19th centuries, abortion was legal before “quickening,” the point at which a woman could feel her fetus move, usually in the fourth month of pregnancy; abortion after that was considered a common-law misdemeanor. From that point on in this country, there have been battles and negotiations over women’s reproductive lives. (For more on how abortion’s past could become its future, [click here](#).)

1800

1820s–1830s: Abortifacient herbs and fungi such as savin, pennyroyal, and ergot often kill the women who use them. So states begin to pass poison-control measures, the country’s first abortion-regulation statutes.



1821: Connecticut passes the first statutory abortion regulation in the U.S., banning the use of poison to induce abortions after quickening. The punishment is a life sentence.

1840s: Abortionist Madame Restell makes a fortune and scandalizes New York society, advertising her abortifacients in newspapers.



1857: The new American Medical Association begins a campaign to criminalize abortion — partly an effort to put midwives and homeopaths out of business.

1869: The Catholic Church condemns abortion at any stage of pregnancy.

1873: Congress passes the Comstock Law, which bans information about and distribution of contraceptives. Twenty-four states subsequently pass similar laws regulating the sale and use of contraceptives.

1880s: Almost all states have laws criminalizing abortion.

1880s: Abortionists' tools at the Museum of Contraception and Abortion in Vienna — one tool dating as early as the 1880s.



1900

1916: Margaret Sanger is arrested for opening the country's first birth-control clinic in Brooklyn, the precursor to Planned Parenthood.



1930: Abortion is the official cause of death for 2,700 women, nearly one-fifth of all maternal deaths that year.

1951: Sanger enlists scientist Gregory Pincus to develop a "magic pill," which will become the first oral contraceptive.

1950s: Women in East Germany use the violently vibrating washing machine the “Schallwäscher” to end unwanted pregnancies by placing it on their stomachs.



1960: The FDA approves its first oral contraceptive, Enovid.

1962: Nearly 1,600 women are admitted to Harlem Hospital Center for incomplete abortions.

1964: Geraldine Santoro dies in a Connecticut motel after a botched abortion. This harrowing photo is published by *Ms.* magazine in April 1973 and becomes a symbol of the pro-choice movement.



1965: The Supreme Court **rules** that an 1879 law criminalizing contraception violates a married couple’s right to privacy, laying the groundwork for *Roe v. Wade*.

1967: Colorado is the first state to liberalize its laws, allowing abortion in cases of rape, incest, fetal defects, or for mental-health reasons.

1968: A Los Angeles hospital admits 701 women with septic abortions this year, approximately one admission for every 14 deliveries.

1969: The underground Chicago collective Jane performs 12,000 safe abortions between 1969 and 1973.

1970: Hawaii is the first state to legalize abortion. New York repeals its law criminalizing abortion soon after.

1971: The Supreme Court agrees to hear the case of Norma McCorvey (“Jane Roe”) against Henry Wade, the Dallas D.A. who enforced a Texas law banning abortion except in cases of life endangerment.



1972: In the year before *Roe v. Wade* is decided, an estimated 130,000 women have illegal or self-induced abortions. Over 100,000 women travel to New York City for an abortion, 50,000 of them traveling more than 500 miles.

1973: In a 7-2 decision, the Supreme Court grants women the right to terminate pregnancies under the 14th Amendment with *Roe v. Wade*.



1976: Congress passes the [Hyde Amendment](#), barring the use of Medicaid and other federal funding for abortions.

1982: Pennsylvania passes the [Abortion Control Act](#), which imposes a 24-hour waiting period, requires married women to inform their husbands, and mandates parental consent for minors.

1984: A clinic and two doctors' offices in Pensacola, Florida, are bombed by abortion opponents.

1992: *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* affirms the core ruling of *Roe v. Wade* but also upholds much of the Abortion Control Act. States will be allowed to restrict abortion access short of imposing an “undue burden.”

1993: Dr. David Gunn is **shot and killed** by a protester outside his clinic in Pensacola, the first known killing of an abortion provider in the U.S.

1994: In May, in the wake of Dr. Gunn's murder, Congress passes the **Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act (FACE)**, which makes it a federal crime to block access to reproductive health care.

1994: In July, Dr. John Bayard Britton and a clinic volunteer are **shot and killed** outside a Pensacola clinic. In December, two are killed and five are wounded during a shooting rampage at two Massachusetts abortion clinics.

1998: In January, a nail bomb **explodes** outside a clinic in Birmingham, Alabama, killing a guard and maiming a nurse. Later that year, James C. Kopp shoots Dr. Barnett Slepian, a Buffalo abortion doctor, through his kitchen window.



2000

2000: In June, the Nebraska statute banning “partial-birth abortion” is ruled **unconstitutional** because it doesn't make an exemption for preserving the life of the mother, invalidating 29 other state laws.

2000: In September, the FDA approves the abortion pill mifepristone (RU-486) after a decade-long campaign by activists and health-care providers.

2003: Norma McCorvey (“Jane Roe”), who says she regrets her role in the landmark court case, files a motion with a U.S. District Court in Dallas to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

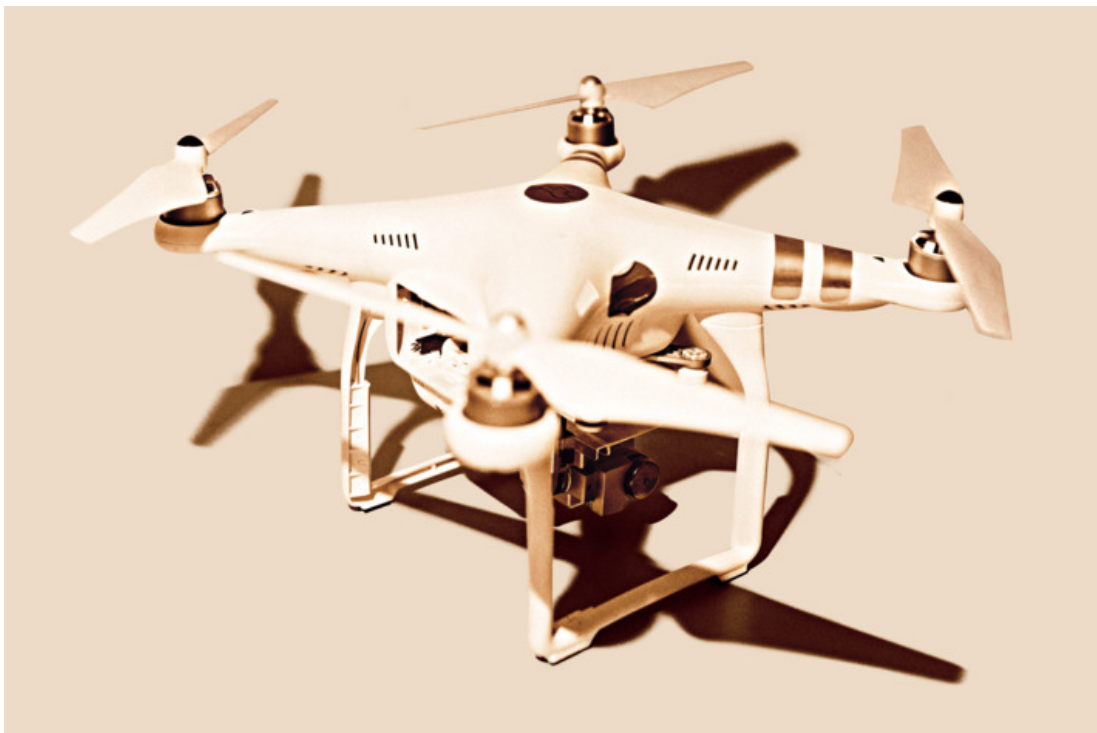
2007: The Supreme Court effectively **reverses** its 2000 ruling on “partial-birth abortion,” upholding a 2003 federal law banning the procedure.

2009: Dr. George Tiller, one of few providers of late-term abortions, is **shot and killed** while attending church in Kansas.



2015: In March, 33-year-old Indiana woman **Purvi Patel** is sentenced to 20 years after self-aborting with medication she ordered online. In December, 31-year-old Tennessee woman Anna Yocca is charged with first-degree attempted murder for trying to self-abort with a coat hanger.

2015: In June, the Dutch pro-choice group Women on Waves **sends a drone** carrying packages of abortion pills on its maiden flight from Germany to Poland, where abortion is severely restricted. The official number of abortions performed in Poland, a country of 38 million, is only about 750 per year, but Women on Waves says the real number is closer to 240,000.



2015: In November, Robert L. Dear Jr. **opens fire** at a Planned Parenthood in Colorado Springs, killing three and wounding nine. A self-described “warrior for the babies,” he is later found mentally incompetent and unfit to stand trial.

2016: States have enacted 1,074 abortion restrictions since *Roe v. Wade*, more than a quarter of them since 2010.

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